

FEMALE DILEMMA

Rdo rje dpal 'byor རྡོ་རྗེ་དཔལ་པོ་འབྲུག། (Duojihuanjiao 多吉环角)*

The early morning was tranquil and undisturbed, except for cricket chirps in the distant barley, wheat, and canola fields. A dawn chorus began as sunrise chiseled at the night's darkness. Early birds perched on courtyard walls and poplar, willow, juniper, and apricot tree branches. Their twittering was more audible in the morning because the raucous thump-thump of hand tractors, honking of cars searching for people looking for a ride to the township town, mooing cows waiting to be milked, and crowing roosters had yet to begin.

As usual, Mtsho skyid woke up at six on her adobe bed heated by the stove that channeled heat through the bed, warming it. The stove was also used for cooking. Mtsho skyid's bed companions were her six-year-old daughter, Klu mo - nicknamed Klu b+he - and her loudly snoring husband, Dbang chen. Klu b+he slept peacefully in the warm sheepskin robe her grandmother had made. After securing her pink head scarf, Mtsho skyid donned a robe made from black synthetic sheep skin and tightly cinched a red sash around her waist. Extending her hands, she rolled up her sleeves to do chores more comfortably.

An old-fashioned, grimy wooden cupboard ornamented with carved flower-like patterns stood against the wall facing the door. The upper shelves displayed well-organized rows of bowls patterned with dragons and the Eight Auspicious Symbols.¹ The central cupboard had four flower-decorated enameled steel kettles and a wooden case with a sliding top containing roasted barley flour and bits of dried cheese. Screwdrivers, nails, and pliers were stored

* Rdo rje dpal 'byor. 2023. Female Dilemma. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 63:370-383.

¹The Eight Auspicious Symbols are the parasol, golden fish, treasure vase, lotus, right-turning white conch, victory banner, the Dharma wheel, and the eternal knot.

in a row of drawers at the bottom.

Every morning, Mtsho skyid polished the cupboard with a small piece of sheep fat and a cloth until it gleamed.

She scooped ash from the adobe stove into a rusty metal container, carried it to the outhouse, and emptied it. Next, she filled the now-empty container with dry cow, sheep, and goat dung and carried it to a storeroom. Heading to a corner of the fenced orchard in the family courtyard, she put chopped firewood in the front fold of her robe and carried it back to the house, where she put the firewood and dung into the stove. She lit a bunch of straw to start the fire while chanting *Skyabs 'gro*¹ non-stop.

Buddhist scriptures with yellowish covers were arranged in order on the shelves in the shrine room. Mtsho skyid and Dbang chen leafed through them at least once a year. Sometimes two or three relatives helped turn the pages of each scripture on the day of a religious festival, usually after the Tibetan New Year. Images of Tara² and Ao rgyan rin po che³ hung on the walls. Having offered water in seven medium-sized copper receptacles on a table in front of the shelves to the Buddhist images and scriptures, and after lighting a butter lamp, Mtsho skyid prostrated seven times. With her palms together, she prayed for her family's well-being, peaceful and harmonious relations between people, and protection from accidents and disasters.

Holding a wooden bucket, she walked to the pen where cows and calves were tied to poles some distance apart and drove two Holsteins, a black cow, and a white-spotted brown cow from the pen that shielded the cattle from the rain and chilly air to an open-air enclosure. She picked up a frayed rope from the ground, hobbled one of the Holstein's back legs, and began milking. As she squeezed

¹ *Skyabs 'gro* or *Skyabs su 'gro ba* 'Taking Refuge' to accept the Three Jewels (the Buddha, Dharma, and the Sangha) as refuge and decisively commit to free your and others' suffering in samsara (<https://bit.ly/3DfwCzv> October 2022).

² Sphyan ras gzigs, Avalokitesvara.

³ Padmasambhava 'Born from a Lotus'.

the smooth teats, milk spurted and splashed against the bucket. After what she deemed a proper milking time, she untied the hobbles and the cow's three-month-old calf from the pole. The calf jumped crazily, rushed to its mother, and vigorously butted her udder. The energetic nursing seemed to pain its mother, but she suffered placidly, periodically swishing her tail and turning to look at and lick her calf.

After milking three cows, sunlight illuminated the earth, heralding a splendid, sunny spring day. Smoke coiled up from the chimney of every household. "How fast time passes," Mtsho skyid thought and hurried to finish other chores.

She had difficulty adapting to the farming workload when she first came to her husband's home in the autumn. The family had twenty *mu*¹ of barley and thirty *mu* of canola. All the farm work was done by hand, and there was no escape, even late in her pregnancy. Her husband was frequently absent, wandering and drinking with his friends. During the harvest season, she needed to assist other families in a web of reciprocal labor relationships.

She now had some leisure time and felt less anxious.

She had dreamed of falling from a cliff the night before, which filled her with foreboding. A sgrol, a neighbor's thirty-year-old daughter, suffered from ovarian cancer. Several years earlier, a sgrol had gone to a distant pastoral area to collect caterpillar fungus, had formed a relationship with a local man, and brought him home. Locals gossiped that he was homeless. The couple lived together but held no wedding and soon left. Her parents said they had gone to do construction work.

A sgrol was very ill when they returned after several years with no children. Once plump and dynamic, she was a barely recognizable pale, skeletal figure. Her family invited monks to chant scriptures to heal her. When there was no improvement, her family

¹ One *mu* = 0.067 hectares.

took her to a hospital, where she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. The doctor suggested chemotherapy. A sgrol's father, Khon rgyal, asked a *bla ma* for a divination. The *bla ma* said this was not ideal. Time passed, and eventually, they accepted the doctor's recommendation. A sgrol lost all her hair during chemotherapy treatments,

Now, a year later, her condition had steadily worsened. Dpa mtsho, A sgrol's mother, understood her daughter could not be cured and desperately wept from time to time. Eventually, A sgrol needed help eating and with toileting.

A sgrol's husband had escorted her home after those years of absence, then left and not returned. He had said he would return soon after visiting his parents, but it was a lie. Later, A sgrol's parents tried unsuccessfully to contact him. Her mother blamed and cursed him for her daughter's condition.

Mtsho skyid occasionally sent some milk to A sgrol's household.

Dpa mtsho desperately declared, "Now, bones are all that remains of my daughter. We should have followed the *bla ma*'s initial advice and never done chemotherapy. That's why her condition worsened."

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Mtsho skyid and some fellow women weeded in the field and gossiped about anything new in the community.

"What a pity! A sgrol got a horrible disease that can never be cured," said one woman with a pink headscarf.

"It's the consequence of the misconduct of her grandfather, who once burnt religious scriptures during the chaos years ago," said another.

"Also, her husband abandoned her. What a pathetic woman!"

Mtsho skyid remained silent.

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After milking six cows, Mtsho skyid put the full milk bucket in a higher and safer place so the calves would not knock it over. She

then drove two steers out of the pen and collected dung amid the odor of manure familiar from the day of her birth. She picked up a willow branch basket from a corner of the pen and slung it on her back. She picked up very moist manure piles and tossed them into the basket. When it was full, she carried it to the foot of an earthen wall that also functioned as the house's outer yard. She made four such trips. Next, she used her hands to shape and flexibly press the moist manure into thin, flat patties and stuck them on the adobe wall. She would pull them off and store them in the fuel room when they eventually dried.

After completing all her duties in the animal pen, she carried the full bucket of milk to the room that stored milk, cheese, and butter, as well as sacks of wheat, barley, and canola. She carefully opened the door to keep the cat inside. The cat prevented mice from eating the grain. She poured milk into a giant stainless-steel cylindrical vessel, then took the wooden bucket with a bit of milk back to the house. Her husband sat cross-legged by the adobe stove on a rectangular black and white striped rug woven from sheep wool and yak hair, fingering his prayer beads and chanting *Skybs 'gro*. Klu b+he scampered around the house murmuring and holding a doll Mtsho skyid had acquired by trading five months of hair from her brush with a vendor.

Mtsho skyid washed her dung-encrusted hands in a stainless-steel basin on a washstand outside the house. Her fingertips were cracked from daily chores.

Inside, water rapidly boiled in the pot on the adobe stove over a fiercely burning firewood-dung fire that occasionally sent out bursts of flame.

Mtsho skyid shredded some tea leaves from a tea brick and tossed them into the pot with water and milk to make milk tea. Next, she scooped up some smoldering cow dung and placed the dung on the altar in front of the house. She added two full spoons of barley flour mixed with juniper needles and sugar, then sprinkled water on it. With a small copper ladle, she flung water to the sky while beseeching the deities to protect her family from evil and

misfortune.

Returning, she put *rtsam pa*¹ in Dbang chen's ceramic bowl and hers. She added dried cheese from the wooden case, butter, and milk tea, then offered her husband his bowl with both hands. She helped her daughter mix *rtsam pa*, butter, and sugar in a small wooden bowl. Mtsho skyid put a plate of steamed buns on the ground, sat on a small rug at the foot of the stove, and sipped milk tea. Her daughter sat by her father, breaking the silence by counting bits of tea that floated in the tea and joyfully announcing, "Three guests will come today."

"Don't sit cross-legged. That's how boys sit," chided Mtsho skyid.

Klu b+he reluctantly sat like her mother, kneeling on both knees, though sitting cross-legged was more comfortable.

Klu b+he was six and hadn't started school. Locals believed it was better to send children to school when they were around nine or ten years old as they were more likely to understand, learn more, and be better able to avoid bullying from other students.

As Mtsho skyid thought about Klu b+he and school, she recalled her time there.

Before Mtsho skyid began school, she imagined it as a wonderful place where she would play with other children. She envied her cousin, Rdo rje, when he described how much fun he had with other children playing hide and seek, running competitions, etc. However, she found a very different reality.

Walking to school early in the morning was a nightmare, especially in winter. She left home in darkness, full of terrifying possibilities. The school was about three kilometers from her house, so it was a long walk. Every morning, she woke up full of fear and worried that she would be late again for school.

Moonlight illuminated her dark silent path. The five-year-old family watchdog began barking when she clanged open the

¹ Roasted barley flour.

metal gate but calmed after recognizing her. She trembled as the cold penetrated her thick clothes and wrapped her orange-red scarf around her head, exposing only her eyes. The stars sparkled in the sky. She searched for the Big Dipper as she walked along the rough, unpaved path and noticed a meteor streak across the sky and vanish, meaning someone would die. She was sorry she had seen it and chanted *ma Ni*¹ as her grandmother had instructed in such situations.

"Where did the meteor go?" she wondered.

Halfway to school, she suddenly noticed a dark manlike shape in the distance. Her heart raced. Hardly able to breathe, her steps slowed. The 'thing' was near the path. She looked around but saw nothing out of the ordinary. She took a few more steps and waited for a passerby to follow. As it grew lighter, a student approached. She followed. "Pitiful!" she thought as she saw that the 'thing' was a man wearing a black robe lying on the ground, his head covered with the robe. "Maybe he's drunk," she wondered.

She was late for school. Her head teacher scolded and further humiliated her by ordering her to stand in the center of the schoolyard for an hour. During the first-class break time, students came and surrounded her. Embarrassed, she stuck her chin to her chest, totally overwhelmed.

Younger classmates in her class were often maltreated. The monitor and his companions were tall bullies. If a child got a new notebook, pen, or snack, they snatched it and warned, "If any of you accuse us to the teacher or your family, you'll be very sorry!"

Math was the weakest subject for most students, including Mtsho skyid. The teacher wrote numbers on the blackboard in every math class while talking. Most students had no idea what he was teaching. Mtsho skyid appeared to concentrate, but fear forced her to stare intently at the blackboard until the class ended. After the math teacher assigned homework, she copied everything from

¹ The Avalokitesvara mantra: *oM ma Ni pad+me hUM* – the Six Sacred Syllables.

others.

After every exam, the teacher furiously announced the students' scores, glaring at those who got very low scores. Next, he ordered the monitor to bring the skipping rope from his office. Students who didn't pass the exam had to roll up their pant legs and line up while the teacher whipped their calves with all his might. Some cried and trembled. The rope left red, swollen welts that transitioned from numbness to agonizing pain.

No student told their parents about such punishment or the other students' bullying. Like her peers, Mtsho skyid hid her bruises from her parents and kept quiet about her monitor's bullying, fearing more abuse.

She often wished to stop attending school. By coincidence, when she was in Grade Four, her father said schooling was useless and told her to stay home and help herd livestock, which was exactly what she wanted.

"You should grind some barley flour for the religious ritual," said Dbang chen.

A month earlier, Mtsho skyid had experienced pain in the joints of her feet. The *bla ma* said this was because she had dug soil near a spring, disturbing the water deity, so the family should chant and hold a ritual near the spring.

After a quick breakfast, Dbang chen drove their cattle along a narrow rocky road toward the family's grazing land, about an hour away. The grazing land of each household was fenced to avoid mixing with other families' livestock.

She was satisfied Dbang chen had settled down, stopped drinking, and helped her with family chores. Seemingly, he had learned from his earlier insane behavior and its consequences.

Some months before, Dbang chen drunkenly cursed Mtsho skyid without provocation other than general discomfort with life. She responded with a few words and suggested he sleep. He violently shoved over a wooden cupboard with glass sliders and drawers in

response. Glasses and bowls shattered everywhere. Broken shards covered the floor. Dbang chen grabbed her by the hair. Mtsho skyid pleaded with him to stop, afraid their sleeping daughter would be frightened, but he continued shouting curses and threats. Klu b+he woke, terrified at the sight of the broken glasses and bowls, overturned cabinets, and her father abusing her mother. She shrieked and cried loudly.

Mtsho skyid was fed up with her husband and felt insecure. She scooped up her daughter and strode out of the house with hatred in her heart, resolving never to live with that crazy man again. She pessimistically thought, "What evil did I do in my last life to merit this miserable life?"

She patted Klu b+he's head and comforted, "Don't be afraid, sweetheart. It will all soon be fine."

Klu b+he clutched her mother, confused about her parents' relationship.

They walked the two kilometers to Mtsho skyid's brother's house, where they spent the night. The following day, her brother drove them by motorcycle to the herding area where their parents lived.

Once there, Mtsho skyid tearfully described how her husband abused her. She stayed for a month, despite her mother's attempts to persuade her to return: "I'm so sorry about your situation, but this is a woman's destiny. A marriage is more important than anything else for a woman. Divorce shouldn't be your choice because others will denigrate you."

Some of Dbang chen's older relatives came asking her to return. Mtsho skyid's mother said they needed to return with Dbang chen, who must promise not to beat his wife and stop drinking.

After some weeks, the relatives returned with Dbang chen, who wrote and signed a statement that he would no longer drink and never again abuse Mtsho skyid. If he violated these promises, his relatives would be responsible. He further authenticated this pledge with fingerprints from his left hand.

Considering her mother's advice and thinking about Klu

b+he's future, Mtsho skyid reluctantly returned.

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Mtsho skyid picked up the black ceramic container wrapped in a robe containing wheat flour that had fermented the night before on the warm adobe. She took it to the cutting board and poured the fermented dough into a plastic basin, leaving a piece of starter dough for the next fermentation. She sprinkled a bit of baking soda on the dough, added water and wheat flour, and divided the dough into two pieces. She mixed oil with one and added nothing to the second piece.

After kneading some of the dough, she cut a piece and made it into a thin round shape, using a cleaver to make linear patterns, and put it on a metal plate she held with one hand. Taking a towel and a scoop in the other hand, she walked outside, where she had prepared a pile of burnt sheep dung powder the night before. She brushed away hot ashes atop an aluminum pot she had buried the night before, put the dough inside the pot, picked up the pot cover with a cloth, and covered it with hot ash. At intervals of about ten minutes, she removed one loaf of baked bread and started baking another.

At the same time, taking an old wooden churn from the storeroom, she placed it under the shade of a tree in the yard and poured the three full containers of milk she had collected three days earlier. She then put the churning stick in the churn, closed the lid, and sealed the crevice with dough to prevent milk from leaking.

Folding the front part of the robe under the sash and rolling up her sleeves, she began churning the milk, counting the number of churns. She would bake bread later.

After two hours of churning, she opened the churn. Butter was at the top. She took a handful of butter from the churn, put it in a basin of cold water, and patted it into a ball.

Later, she boiled the buttermilk and filtered cheese through a netting bag fastened between two wooden poles.

She cut a piece of hot just-baked bread and smeared fresh butter on it for Klu b+he, playing alone in the garden. She hurried

toward her mother when she knew there was hot bread with butter - her favorite.

"Sister, are you at home?" called a man suddenly, approaching her house.

Wondering who it might be, Mtsho skyid immediately replied, "Yes, I'm here," and stepped outside.

The neighbor's son said, "My mother is asking for your help to cook. The *bla ma* will arrive soon."

"*Bla ma*?"

"Yes, my sister's condition is worse. She's eaten nothing in days and constantly moans in agony. She's in great pain. We can't bear to see her going through all this. Our relatives gathered and discussed a solution. We finally agreed to invite the *bla ma*."

"I'm so sorry! I'll come in a few minutes."

Worried and agitated, she hurriedly cleaned the churn and walked with her daughter to the neighbor's house. When they arrived, A sgrol's mother asked Mtsho skyid to make dumplings for the *bla ma*. Mtsho skyid went to the kitchen where Mkha' 'gro, the neighbor's daughter-in-law, was rolling out the dumpling wrappers.

They greeted each other.

"I'll be responsible for making the wrappers. Please wrap the filling since I can't make good-looking dumplings," Mkha' 'gro asserted.

"Sure, I'll wrap them," Mtsho skyid replied.

As she put a bit of minced meat in the center of each wrapper and expertly closed it, she thought how miserable A sgrol's mother must be. Mtsho skyid knew she would have gone crazy if anything like that happened to her daughter.

About an hour later, a red car arrived. Everyone went out to welcome the *bla ma*. The driver got out first and greeted them all, then assisted the *bla ma* in getting out of the car as everyone bowed to show respect. Khon rgya bowed, extended his hands with upturned palms in greeting, and escorted the *bla ma* into the house.

Plates of fruit and fried bread were arranged on the living room tables. The *bla ma* sat on a seat covered with yellow fabric

higher than others in the room. He was offered milk tea with butter in a yellow bowl decorated with the Eight Auspicious Symbols. Mutton and dumplings would be offered later. Others sat on small stools and described A sgrol's situation. Khon rgya was in a gloomy mood. His heart must have been bleeding, but he tried to appear strong.

After they all agreed to chant '*Pho ba*,¹ the *bla ma* was led to where A sgrol lay. A barely breathing human skeleton, she no longer recognized anyone. The *bla ma* began with words that comforted at least the onlookers and began chanting. Others knelt and prayed with their palms together.

A sgrol had one brother and two sisters. All were married. The brother remained in his parents' home, while the two sisters had moved to their husbands' homes in other communities. The sisters visited their ill sister once, but their responsibility for their family chores, herding, and babysitting meant they could not stay long.

When the *bla ma* was leaving, the family offered 500RMB with a *kha tag*.² Everyone kowtowed, and the *bla ma* touched their heads with a string of prayer beads.

In a melancholy mood, Mtsho skyid clutched her daughter's hand and returned to her house late in the afternoon.

Before sunset, her husband drove the cattle back from the grazing land and, as usual, said nothing. He seemed unhappy, which was his normal mood. He lay on the bed to watch a TV program while Mtsho skyid chopped mutton on a small cutting board for dinner.

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When Mtsho skyid learned the following day that A sgrol had passed away, she went to the house full of weeping to offer assistance. A sgrol's sisters arrived and mourned. Mtsho skyid tried

¹ "The transference or ejection of consciousness at the moment of death, a practice which may be performed for oneself or on behalf of ..." <https://bit.ly/3eSl8sz> 20 October 2022.

² A strip of white scarf.

to console them, but it was not until an older woman urged, "Crying brings a lot of fear to the deceased in Bar do,¹ " that they ceased wailing.

Young women who were close relatives replaced their hair bands with white ones to show respect for the deceased, while the young men turned their hats inside out, with some attaching a white ribbon to the hats.

Locals visited the family one after another to offer condolences when they heard the news, offering tea bricks, butter, and money. Relatives and neighbors came to help with the cooking and religious rituals. Women busily cooked and served the visitors.

Dpa mtsho offered a huge *tsha gsur*² at the house's gate to prevent the deceased from experiencing hunger and alleviate her fear in Bar do. Seven monks from a local monastery came and chanted for seven days to lessen A sgrol's sins, to ensure she would have a good next life, be reborn as a human, and to prevent her from going to Hell.

Hundreds of butter lamps were made and lit in lines on a long, rectangular table. Some men tended the lamps, cleaned the depleted ones, and made new ones. Everyone held a string of prayer beads and ceaselessly chanted *ma Ni*.

A sgrol's sisters wailed plaintively when a new visitor or relative arrived. A sgrol's mother did not cry. Perhaps her tears had run out, or perhaps months ago, she had accepted her daughter's death.

People gathered to chant two days after A sgrol's death. An esteemed senior nun sat in the upper part of the room and started *ma Ni*-chanting in a melody reserved for particular rituals. Others followed in chorus, creating so much emotion that some wept uncontrollably.

¹ An intermediate state in the death-rebirth cycle where the soul resides between death and being reborn into the world (<https://bit.ly/3DI66z4> 29 October 2022).

² An offering of a mix of roasted barley flour, the three whites (milk, yogurt, butter), and the three sweets (sugar, molasses, honey).

Late that night, men took the corpse in a car to a sky burial¹ site according to the *bla ma*'s suggestion. Relatives chanted and offered butter lamps for seven days. Local women fasted together twice for the deceased. Mtsho skyid also participated, chanting 100,000 *ma Ni* and praying for A sgrol.

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Human fragility was now so obvious Mtsho skyid resolved to chant more frequently and trust Buddha to provide protection and well-being in her current and future lives.

TIBETAN TERMS

'pho ba འཕོ་བ།
a sgrol ཨ་སྒྲོལ།
Avalokiteśvara, spyan ras
gzigs བྱུན་རས་གཟིགས།
bar do བར་དོ།
bla ma བླ་མ།
dbang chen དབང་ཆེན།
Dharma, chos ཆོས།
dpa mtsho དཔའ་མཚོ།
khon rgyal ཁོན་རྒྱལ།
klu b+he ལུ་བླེ།
klu mo ལུ་མོ།
ma Ni མ་ཎི།

mkha' 'gro མ་ཁའ་འགོ།
mtsho skyid མཚོ་སྒྲིད།
oM ma Ni pad+me hUM
ཨོཾ་ཎི་པདྨེ་ཧཱུྃ།
Padmasambhava, ao rgyan
rin po che ཨོ་ཏྲུན་པེ་པ་ཆེ།
rdo rje རྡོ་རྗེ།
rtsam pa རྩམ་པ།
Samsara, 'khor ba འཁོར་བ།
Sangha, dge 'dun དགེ་འདུན།
skyabs 'gro སྐབས་འགོ།
skyabs su 'gro ba སྐབས་སུ་འགོ་བ།
tsha gsur ཚ་གསུམ།

CHINESE TERM

mu 厩

¹ A funeral practice involving placing a corpse on a mountain or outdoor structure to decompose or be eaten by scavenging animals (https://bit.ly/3VMGRCN 22 October 2022).